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## THE ORIGIN OF THE CUSTOM OF SITTING ON THE STAGE

A few years ago Professor C. W. Wallace advanced the novel statements that "the fad of sitting on the stage came into vogue with the Blackfriars in 1597", that it is first alluded to in 1598, and that it was "a custom in no other theatre in Elizabeth's reign".<sup>1</sup> The assertions were as unfortunate as they were novel, for in a short while after their appearance Professor C. R. Baskervill showed conclusively that the custom must have originated before 1597, hence not at the Blackfriars, and that it was by no means confined to private theatres.<sup>2</sup>

Very recently, however, Professor Feuillerat has found documents establishing the existence of a Blackfriars Theatre as early as 1577.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this important discovery the question may arise whether after all the custom of sitting on the stage did not originate at the Blackfriars. Indeed, W. J. Lawrence has already raised the question. Speaking of the size and structure of this early playhouse, and arguing that it possessed no galleries for spectators, he writes:<sup>4</sup> "One can readily surmise that when the house was in the meridian of its prosperity, say in 1582, when Gosson speaks of 'a great many comedies' being acted there, the supply of pit-seats would often be considerably less than the demand. Surely we have in this a clue to the origin of sitting on the stage. It seems reasonably well assured that that custom began in the private theatre, and it has already been demonstrated that it was in existence before the erection of the second Blackfriars. We have, therefore, fair grounds for assuming that it first came into force at Farrant's house. If this assumption could be taken as a certainty, it would of itself prove the absence of galleries in the earlier Blackfriars, as, most indubitably, it can only have been under the severest pressure that the custom was allowed to spring into existence."

<sup>1</sup> *Children of the Chapel at Blackfriars*, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> *Mod. Philology*, VIII, 581-86.

<sup>3</sup> *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, XLVIII, pp. 81 seq.

<sup>4</sup> *The Eliz. Playhouse and Other Studies*, p. 234.

Now several statements in the passage above demand our attention. In the first place, it can certainly be shown that long before Burbage opened his Blackfriars the English stage had "under the severest pressure" been utilized by spectators for the purpose of sitting. We are told, for example, that great things would have been done at Gray's Inn on Innocent's Night, 1594, "if the multitude of beholders had not been so exceeding great, that thereby was no convenient room for those that were actors." As a result of this multitude, we are further informed, "there arose such a disordered tumult and crowd upon the stage, that there was no opportunity to effect that which was intended: there came so great a number of worshipful personages upon the stage that might not be displaced, and gentlewomen whose sex did privilege them from violence."<sup>5</sup>

That such a practice was rather common at the University may be implied from a passage in Sir John Harington's *Apology* (1596) for his *Metamorphosis of Ajax* (p. 21). "But methinks," he writes, "you may say, that here is a marvellous restraint made of shewing this discourse of mine, not much unlike to our stage-keepers in Cambridge, that for fear lest they should want company to see their comedies, go up and down with vizors and lights, puffing and thrusting, and keeping out all men so precisely, till all the town is drawn by this revel to the place; and at last, tag and rag, fresh men and sub-sizers, and all to be packed in together so thick, as now is scant left room for the prologue to come upon the stage."

It is entirely conceivable, then, that similar circumstances at the earlier Blackfriars might have led to a similar invasion of stage regions, and that such a custom once established might have easily spread to other theatres. But even if we admit that the fad was in vogue at Farrant's house, we cannot say strictly that it originated there; for there is indisputable evidence that spectators at private performances before royalty occupied the stage long before Farrant conceived the idea of fitting up his private theatre. The origin of such a practice at private theatricals is probably twofold: the prom-

<sup>5</sup> *Gesta Grayorum*, Nichols, *Prog. of Eliz.*, ed. 1788, II, 14-17.

inence of the chief spectator, and the size and structure of the stages, which at courtly entertainments seem, until rather a late date, to have served for the masque following the play as well as for the play itself.<sup>6</sup>

Whether Henry VIII <sup>7a</sup> ever occupied the stage on such occasions, I am unable to say, but one passage perhaps implies that he did. Writing to his brother in 1527, Spinelli thus described the play given by Wolsey: "Supper being ended, they proceeded to the first hall . . . . where a very well designed stage had been prepared, on which the Cardinal's gentlemen recited Plautus' Latin comedy entitled *Menaechmi*. On its conclusion all the actors, one after the other, presented themselves to the King, and on their knees recited to him, some more and some less, Latin verses in his praise." <sup>7b</sup>

Similarly the epilogues of early court plays must have been spoken directly to royalty very near at hand; and there is considerable evidence to show that the actors, instead of descending from the stage and passing to the royal state or canopy at the opposite end of the hall, where it was situated in the later masques, really remained on the stage, and kneeling before the state very close at hand addressed the royal

<sup>6</sup> Cf. passages below, Reyher, *Les Masques Anglais*, Machyn, *Diary*, p. 275, etc.

<sup>7a</sup> In connection with the origin of the custom of sitting on the stage two or three passages should perhaps be noted. Writing about the early indoor stage in Paris, Stuart, (*Stage Decoration in France*, p. 193) refers to a miniature of Jean Fouquet showing "a second story of a stage in which is found Paradise, the emperor, certain devils and some spectators." What are these "spectators"? *Élégantes* on the stage were unknown in France in the middle of the sixteenth century, says Bapst (*Essai sur l'histoire du Théâtre*, p. 146). Albright in quoting the stage direction accompanying the stage plan of the *Castle of Perseverance* defines *stytelerys* as auditors (*The Shakspearian Stage*, p. 14). Furnivall, however, in his edition of the Macro Plays gives to the word the meaning of *orderers, arrangers, managers*. There is no evidence, says Rennert (*The Spanish Stage*, p. 65), that spectators occupied the stage in Spain in the sixteenth century, although he affirms that one might infer from a passage (latter half of sixteenth century) that they occupied the platform at the presentation of the short *autos* or farces (*Ibid.*, note).

<sup>7b</sup> *Cal. State Papers, Venetian*, 1527-33, p. 2.

occupant. That this state was sometimes placed on the stage there can be no doubt. Such was the case at Cambridge in 1564. According to Feuillerat,<sup>8</sup> the "dais" of the Queen was on this occasion "contre l'un des murs latéraux" of King's College Chapel. It was situated *on* the stage, however, as the following passage shows: "For the hearing and playing whereof ['Aulularia Plauti'], was made, by her Highness surveyor and at her own cost, in the body of the Church, a great stage containing the breadth of the church from one side to the other, that the chappels might serve for houses. In the length it ran two of the lower chappels full, with the pillars on a side. Upon the south-wall was hanged a cloth of state, with the appurtenances and half-path for her Majesty . . . . When all things were ready for the plays, the Lord Chamberlayn with Mr. Secretary came in, bringing a multitude of the guard with them, having every man in his hand a torch-staff, for the lights of the play (for no other lights were occupied); and would not suffer any to stand upon the stage, save a very few upon the north side. And the guard stood upon the ground by the stage side, holding their lights. From the quire doore unto the stage was made as 'twere a bridge, rayled on both sides: for the Queen's Grace to go to the stage: which was straightly kept.'" <sup>9</sup>

Now the significant thing about this arrangement is that it was designed by "her Highnes surveyor" and at her own cost. He was obviously reproducing, so far as possible, the conditions as he was acquainted with them at court performances. The invaders of the stage at Cambridge, as described at a later date by Harington, had royal precedent for their procedure.

The passage above is also significant in that it helps to clarify matters at Oxford in 1566. At the disputation there

<sup>8</sup> *Bureau des Menus Plaisirs*, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Nichols, *Prog. of Eliz.*, ed. 1788, I, 13-14. See also Robinsin's description (*Ibid.* III, 59). On this same stage *Dido* and *Ezechias* were also acted (*Ibid.*, I, 17); and while *Dido* was "a handling, the Lo. Robert, steward to the universitie, and Mr. secretarie Cecil, chancellor, to signifye their good wille, and that things might be orderlye done, vouchsafed to hold both books on the scaffold themselves" (*Ibid.*, III, 177).

on the occasion of the Queen's visit, the state apparently occupied the speakers' platform,<sup>10</sup> and in view of the passage above it is virtually certain that, as Feuillerat affirms (*Le Bureau*, p. 73), her Majesty occupied the stage when Edward's *Palamon and Arcyte* was presented on the same occasion. Durand's translation of the part of Bereblock's description which is of significance in this connection follows: "In the first place there was a remarkable proscenium there, with an approach thrown open from the great solid wall; and from it a hanging wooden bridge . . . . stretched across to the great hall of the college . . . . Through this bridge, without commotion and without contact with the pressing crowd, the Queen might hasten by an easy ascent to the play, when it was ready . . . . On each side of the stage magnificent palaces and well equipped houses are built up for the actors in the comedies and for the masked persons (*commédies ac personatis*). On high a seat had been fixed, adorned with cushions and tapestries and covered with a golden canopy; this was the place made ready for the Queen."<sup>11</sup>

Now if it is established that Queen Elizabeth actually occupied the stage at an early date, then the passages suggesting her proximity to the actors in later court plays must be given consideration. In *The Arraignment of Paris*, V, "the state being in place", the Fates "lay down their properties at the Queenes feete", while Diana "delivereth the ball of golde to the Queenes owne hands". In Trotte's introduction to *Misfortunes of Arthur* we have the direction: "Three Muses come upon the stage appparelled accordingly bringing five gentlemen students with them attyred in their usuall garments, whom one of the Muses presented to her Maiestie as captives."

In Lyly's *Sapho and Phao* the Prologue kneels before the Queen and speaks directly to her. In the same manner the prologue to *Gallathea*, the prologue and epilogue to *Endymion*, etc., would gain in point and effectiveness if they were spoken to the Queen actually on the stage. Finally, some light may possibly be thrown on the situation of the chief spec-

<sup>10</sup> Nichols, *Prog. of Eliz.*, III, Wood's account, pp. 110-111.

<sup>11</sup> *P. M. L. A.*, XIII, p. 505, cf. Plummer, *Eliz. Oxford*, pp. 123-24.

tators at court entertainments by Grove's rather indefinite description (1587) of the boor who on the occasion of a court entertainment

“Dyd mynde (if that he myght) to get  
and wryng into the hall:  
To take the vewe, this boyish clowne  
dyd nothing aye appall,  
Though with sight of nobles store  
his doltish eyes were fed,  
But loppeth to the *upper end*,  
his cap upon his head.”

He was promptly ejected by one of the “wayters” who remarked:

“sirrha, to come *so nygh*  
how darest thou be bolde.”<sup>12</sup>

It is time to return to Farrant's Blackfriars. In view of the fact that the custom of sitting on the stage originated before 1577, is it entirely safe to assume that it came into force as a result of limited space and the absence of galleries at Farrant's house? In all probability the practice was in vogue at the early Blackfriars from which it spread to later houses, but in my opinion Elizabethan vanity as well as stage structure is at the basis of the introduction of the fashion into the regular theatres. The gentlemen who occupied the stage were paying for the privilege of sitting where they had seen their superiors sit at private performances; and this is only one of the various ways in which practices at court influenced the regular playhouses during the reign of Elizabeth.

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<sup>12</sup> Grosart, *Occasional Issues*, VI, 122.